DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 348 CS 014 272

AUTHOR	Fry, Edward
TITLE	A Reading Autobiography.
PUB DATE	2001-01-00
NOTE	7p.; This is an article written for the newsletter of the History of Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association, January 2001.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Faculty; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Personal Narratives; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Teachers; *Reminiscence
IDENTIFIERS	Teaching Perspectives

ABSTRACT

This reading autobiography is by the developer of the well known Fry Readability Formula, and it enumerates the highlights of his varied career in education, from 1949, the year he graduated from college until the present time. The autobiography charts his beginnings as a teacher in public school (the custodian made more money than he did), his travels and teaching in Africa, and his long tenure at Rutgers University where he started the Reading Center and a doctoral program in reading. It also makes note of his many popular textbooks and recommends the reading profession. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 450 348

A Reading Autobiography.

by Edward Fry

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
E. Fry
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 014 272

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Reading Autobiography
by Edward Fry

This an article written for the newsletter of the History of Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association, January 2001

Few people accurately remember how they learned to read and I am not among that fortunate few. However one of my earliest remembered reading experiences was stopping by the 10 cents store on the way home from school to read "big little" books. Big little books, for those of you who haven't seen them in antique stores, they were little square books with a page size of about 4 x 4 inches and a picture page on every other page. Since I didn't have the money to buy them , I had to read them standing up in the store The store didn't mind and it probably increased my reading speed considerably. It wasn't until about 5th grade that I discover the public library.

Learning how to eventually become a professor of reading was not very efficient and came about in a curious manner. My goal was to become a school psychologist having graduated with a psychology major from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1949. But, to become a school psychologist at that time required two years teaching experience and a masters degree. Having had no undergraduate education courses I took a crash semester of all education courses at Los Angles State College, then a crash summer school of student teaching. Both I found reasonably worthless.

Actually teaching was a pleasant experience. My first year teaching 6th grade in La Habra, California public school was great. I read aloud to them all of a Richard Halaburton adventure book. One major problem was that the salary of $2740 per year was $40 less than the custodian.

The next year teaching mentally retarded class in Culver City was a very valuable experience. You see the teacher before me thought that the children were too dumb to learn to read. Hence, I got the pleasure of teaching beginning reading. Not many men get to teach beginning reading as for some reason they are often excluded from 1st grade.

That year (1954) I completed my masters degree in school psychology. It was then that a life changing event occurred. Los Angeles City Schools fired most of their school psychologists due to a budget cut back. All of these experienced psychologists sopped up every job for miles around, and my wet ink credential wasn't much good. But, as a required part of the masters degree I had to take a course in remedial reading. This opened the door to my next job.

That year I taught reading in Ventura High School. This consisted of 2 classes of remedial reading (about 3rd grade level), 2 classes of

developmental reading (about 7th grade level), and a number of short courses for college prep students which included some study skills and some reading speed improvement.

About the same time I began teaching an evening course in reading improvement and vocabulary development at Loyola University in Los Angeles to adults in management training courses. I guess I did OK because they offered me an assistant professorship in the education department training students at the masters level. I started the Reading Clinic and opened up a masters program for reading specialists, both of which continue to this day.

While a beginning assistant professor at Loyola I entered the doctoral program in educational psychology at the University of Southern California. They offered no graduate courses in reading other than my masters level (also at USC) remedial reading course.

The International Reading Association hadn't been formed yet but I did attend one reading conference sponsored by ICIRI or something like that. I remember attending a talk by Emmett Betts. I loved his text book Foundations of Reading which I was using in my masters program at Loyola along with Edward Dolch's Remedial Reading. Both these book were very influential in my career. The striking thing I remember about Emmett Betts at that conference was that he flew his own airplane there. Years later I heard Dr. Betts speak at IRA and all I can say is that I hope somebody tells me to shut up before I get like that.

I stared attending the National Reading Conference which has also been very influential in my life. At that time (about 1955) it was a small (under 200) group of mostly men, many of which like myself had taught adult reading improvement which in those days was often called Speed Reading. But we were now mostly training teachers and doing research in reading.

One day at Loyola I got a call from Art Mc Donald, the NRC Treasurer, who asked me if I wanted to go to Africa on a Fullbright Lectureship, leaving next month.

I said, "No, ask me next year".

They did and I packed up my wife and two elementary aged kids and taught adult reading improvement in the English Department in the university in Uganda for a year.

One of the courses they gave me to teach was reading improvement to a group of junior college instructors. I knew that they had to go back to their junior colleges and trade schools at teach reading improvement so I devised a scheme. On the first day of class I picked out a student and told him that he was going to teach the class.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll give you complete lecture notes and I'll sit in the back of every class and help you out."

One day while this was going on, an editor from Cambridge University Press visited the class. He asked if those notes and the drill material could be put into a book for him to published. He did publish Teaching Faster Reading and its drill book. It sold widely in the United Kingdom and many other countries (not U.S.) including a Spanish edition in South America.

Another interesting thing occurred in Africa, as part of training the junior college instructors I told them about readability. This led to my efforts to simplify readability formulas by making a readability formula in graph form so that numerical calculations and tables were not necessary. This original graph was based on books graded using Michael West's U.K. system of books using 1000 words, 2000 words, etc. Later in the U.S. I validated the graph using U.S. grade level designations. It became one of the most widely used readability formulas according to readability historian George Klare and the Social Science Citation Index.

That year in Africa led to another life changing occurrence. While there, a tall handsome man and his wife stopped by on a Land Rover safari going from the Mediterranean to Cape Town. Several years earlier he had held the same Fullbright chair I now occupied. His name was Oscar Buros, the famed Mental Measurements Yearbooks editor of Rutgers University.

The next year back teaching at Loyola University I got a call from the search committee at Rutgers University asking if I would consider teaching there. One interview at AREA and they offered me a Full Professorship. Since I was only an Associate Professor at Loyola and since the salary increase from $ 8,500 to $10,000 meant that I would never have to teach summer school again, I accepted. Looking back it seems amazing how easy it was to get promoted.

Shortly after arriving at Rutgers I started the Reading Center and a doctoral program in reading. The main activity of the Reading Center, like the Reading Clinic at Loyola was to bring in children needing remedial instruction for the graduate students to practice on. I usually supervised the intake testing and methods instruction.

The area of reading theory is closely linked with the names of Harry Singer and Robert Ruddell who have turned out classic anthologies of articles or chapters by the best reading theorists in the nation if not the world. I like to think of both Singer and Ruddell as good friends but in all honesty I think very little of reading theories. Maybe I have spent too many years closely associated with remedial readers and classroom teachers. I like something that is useful, practical, and that really teaches a child or adult to read better. Most theories are air castles based on too few research facts and they seldom influence curriculum materials or classroom methods.

In the 1960's I had two books published by Mc Graw Hill. One was on methods used by teaching machines, my dissertation topic. It was

translated into Chech, Spanish, and a few other languages. Modern computer instruction uses many of those methods.

The other book was on remedial reading and it became moderately used in the U.S. A simplified version of that book was written for some Peace Corps trainees and is still in print under the title How To Teach Reading. I was also starting to get a number of journal articles published in both those fields and also a number of secondary reading improvement materials by Jamestown Publishers.

My interest in reading teaching methods was certainly enhanced when I became one of the principal investigators in the USOE sponsored First Grade Studies. For three years I followed 21 classrooms equally divided between teaching with a conventional basal reader series, an experimental phonetically regularized version of the same series using my own invention of the DMS (Diacritical Marking System) which added diacritical marks to every word, and the ITA (Initial Teaching Alphabet) which were materials printed in a special phonetically regular alphabet which was developed in England and promoted by Sir James Pitman (grandson of Pitman Shorthand founder).

Alas, after extensive testing at the end of grade 1, 2, and 3 there was very little difference between the traditional, DMS, and ITA methods. In fact my conclusion after looking at all the First Grade Studies which varied from phonics to language experience (like whole language) to conventional basal series is that there was very little difference. Some prominent people like my friend Jeannie Chall felt there was a slight difference favoring phonics. But I tell teachers, you should know how to teach all of these major reading methods, then choose the one you are most comfortable with. All of the First Grade Studies showed great differences between teachers, so let's get good teachers.

Incidentally Jeannie Chall's own First Grade Study compared observations of teachers who said they used the phonics method with teachers who said they did not. Regular classroom observations showed little difference between the two groups in classroom practice or in end results.

I wrote a college textbook for beginning reading methods course; it never made it to a second edition. However I hit a home run with The Reading Teachers Book of Lists. The basis of the book was simply lists of words and bits of information that I had handed out in reading courses and at the Rutgers Reading Conferences. The book was enhanced by two graduate student co-authors, Jackie Kress and Donna Fountakidis. It is still in print in a 4th Edition and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

One of the word lists in that book is the Instant Words. The first Instant Word list was published while I was at Loyola. It is a list of high frequency words in rank order made by compiling several well known lists, like the Thorndike and Rinsland and some unique sources like a Japanese

code crackers list. Later the Instant Words were updated using the American Heritage list and much work by a graduate student Elizabeth Sakiey. The Instant Words, at least the first 300 of them, have appeared in many college texts and have been used with and without permission by countless teachers, publishers, and school districts. The longer list of 3000 Instant Words is now in print in form of spelling lessons for each week for grades 1 through 6 supplemented by phonics and word study.

I have used a similar plan of frequency for developing phonics lists to answer the question "What is the most useful (frequent) phoneme-grapheme correspondence and what are the most common example words of illustrating that correspondence"? Acceptance of that phonics list has been only moderate. Considerably more widely used is a little book called Phonics Patterns which has all the common rhymes (phonogram families) with all their common example words. I went through three poets rhyming dictionaries and one dissertation to get this material. The use of Phonics Patterns has been greatly enhanced by the recent research in onset and rhyme as an important part of teaching phonics and by the research on the benefits of teaching phonemic awareness to beginning readers. All told, my college texts, teacher tool books, student drill books, flashcarfds, and charts have sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

Africa has called me back twice, once in 1995 to the University of Zimbabwe as a Fulbright to lecture on reading to instructors in teacher training colleges and visit rural student teachers. The second time to Zimbabwe in 1998 was to help the new Aftica University in Mutare Zimbabwe to start a university press. On both trips to Zimbabwe I was accompanied by my second wife.

Perhaps you know the story of the little boy who went into the library and asked for a book on frogs. The librarian gave him 6 books on frogs, two encyclopedia articles on frogs, and a recent magazine story. Later she looked over to see the little boy crying. When she asked why, he simply said "That's more than I want to know about frogs" I hope this long article hasn't made you cry.

I have been greatly honored by being elected a President of the National Reading Conference, a member of the Reading Hall of Fame, listed in Who's Who in Education and maybe something else. Though I retired early (age 62) from Rutgers some 12 years ago, I am still blessed with active writing and speaking assignments, and skiing for 2 months every year. I can certainly recommend the reading profession to anyone because whether you like to sit close to a little kid with your knees crammed under a tiny desk, lecture to college students or teachers, sit in your office and type out scholarly articles, solve research problems, travel to under developed countries, or make money writing curriculum materials, it's all personally rewarding and hopefully does some good for the world.